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MUSSOLINI

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A Biography

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by
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I

" . . . HE was a young man I had never seen before and his agitated manner and unkempt clothes set him apart from the other workers in the hall. The *émigré* audiences were always poorly dressed, but this man was also extremely dirty. I had never seen a more wretched-looking human being. In spite of his large jaw, the bitterness and restlessness in his black eyes, he gave the impression of extreme timidity. Even as he listened, his nervous hands clutching at his big black hat, he seemed more concerned with his own inner turmoil than with what I was saying."

" . . . After a few minutes' conversation in the royal waiting-room, which was decorated with flowers and the flags of Great Britain and Italy, the Prime Minister and Lord Halifax

entered Signor Mussolini's private train which the Duce had placed at their disposal. . . ."

Between these two quotations stretches most of the life of Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini, '*il Duce*,' Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Italy, and one of the most striking characters of our time. The first paragraph was written by Angelica Balabanoff in her book, *My Life as a Rebel*, in which this extraordinary woman described her experiences and adventures as a leader in the pre-war Second International and other proletarian organisations. The second appeared in a London evening paper in the middle of January, 1939. Behind these two lies one of the most amazing success-stories of the twentieth century, the rise of a poor, intensely passionate, hunted young man full of inhibitions, to one of the masters of the world. It is a story which has still a great many unknown ramifications. No man can be judged finally before his death and Signor Mussolini is very much alive. His achievements and blunders, his greatness and his crimes, are debated alike by his enthusiastic followers and by his uncompromising

opponents. But no history of our times could be written without mentioning his name ; he stands for the new Italy and if she falls, he will fall with her.

* * * * *

Benito Mussolini's father, Alessandro, lived in the Romagna. He was always in hot water, being first an anarchist and later—a slight concession—a Communist. By calling he was a blacksmith ; at least, he worked intermittently at his job when he was not in prison. He founded a co-operative community at Predappio and became its mayor.

When Alessandro died in 1910 his son paid him a deeply-moving tribute. Later he described him in his autobiography :

“ . . . A heavy man with large, powerful, fleshy hands, dark-haired, good-natured, not slow to laugh, with strong features and steady gaze. His intense sympathies mingled with doctrines and causes. He discussed them in the evening with his friends and his eyes filled with light. . . . So come and go men whose minds and souls are resolute for good ends.”

Rosa, his wife, was less of a political dreamer and more of a realist. She ruled her brood of

children with an iron hand ; they feared and loved her alike.

Benito was born on a Sunday, July 29th, 1833, at a small village called Varano di Costa in the county of Predappio. Nearby the beautiful plain of Forli stretched with its vineyards, castles, little streams. The fertile Romagna had little to offer to poor people, however, and the child Mussolini knew little of luxury or even comfort. He was named Benito after Benito Juarez who ordered the execution of the Emperor Maximilian and led the Mexican rebellion ; Amilcare, after Amilcare Cipriani, a Romagna Anarchist, and Andrea for Andrea Costa, a local Socialist leader.

Food was scarce and meals were Spartan in the little household. Mussolini is a non-smoker, a teetotaller and almost a vegetarian—all under the influence of the enforced habits of his youth.

Soon after his birth his parents went to live in Dovia where they had two rooms in a decrepit old building. The two boys, Benito and Arnaldo (who later became editor of the Fascist Party organ the *Popolo d'Italia*), slept

in one bed; their sister Edvige slept in the same room as her parents. To eke out the meagre and uncertain earnings of her husband, Rosa Mussolini kept a day-school. She was a devout Catholic and wanted her son to become a priest—but Benito disappointed her. He was expelled in disgrace from the church school because he had stabbed another boy with his penknife. He was always getting into scrapes, even more so than the average little boy. If trouble did not come to him, he went out to find it—and often did. When he was not fighting with boys of other villages he indulged in a little quiet poaching of his own or roamed the countryside. He loved nature, birds and animals and was deeply sorry when he had to leave them to go to a boarding-school at Forlimpopoli. It was at his father's smithy that he listened entranced to political arguments and discussions which went on all the time. Later Alessandro became a publican and now both he and his son were in their element: they could argue and talk all day long. Benito was sharp-witted and quick to find arguments for his own case; slowly he became known as a 'great one for fighting.'

He was always prepared to enforce his arguments with his fists. In his free hours he practised oratory with the same enthusiasm as did his northern colleague Hitler in the Munich beer-gardens. He explained to his mother that one day the whole world would be forced to listen to him and that he was preparing for this contingency.

Although his mother applied for it several times, Benito was refused a stipend at the Royal Normal School. But she saved and scraped together enough to see him through his teachers' college. Mussolini did not enjoy his studies too much. He was still of an unruly, fiery temper ; with all the passion of a Romagnan he denounced the rulers and capitalists. When King Umberto was assassinated in 1900, Benito wrote an essay glorifying the murderer. He was only seventeen, but several of his articles had been published in the Italian Socialist paper *Avanti* !

He graduated a year later, at the age of eighteen. But that did not mean that he was entitled to a post—he had to find one himself. And teachers were plentiful while schools not so numerous. At last he got a teaching job, as

a substitute in an elementary school. It was a small place, Gualteri in the Reggio Emilia. His pay was less than twelve shillings a week ; he had to support himself on this sum which was little even in Italy.

He would have preferred almost any other job, but his mother insisted that he should not become a manual worker. But he did his best to succeed, substituting story-telling and explanation for corporal punishment, trying to better the hygienic morals of his poor pupils and recognising that examinations certainly did not make a standard for the intelligence of these boys and girls.

His job lasted less than a year, then he had to look around again. He decided to travel, to seek his luck abroad ; perhaps in freer countries he would find a decent livelihood.

" Going abroad," he wired to his mother. " Please send money."

Rosa Mussolini sent a few lire—all she could spare. This was the patrimony with which Benito set out to conquer the world at the age of 19 and in the year 1902.

II

IN Yverdun, at the Lake Neuchâtel, he got out of the train. He had to find work if he did not want to starve. Later he described his first experience :

“ After three days of searching I went to work as a labourer. Eleven hours a day, $2\frac{1}{2}$ d. an hour. One hundred and twenty-one trips I made with that hand-barrow full of bricks up the plank to the scaffolding of the house we were building. By night my arm muscles had swelled terribly. I ate a few potatoes baked in ashes. Then, with all my clothes on, I threw myself on the bed, a pile of straw. . . .”

The young bricklayer's mate hated his work and his boss.

“ I chafed with the terrible rage of the powerless. I should have liked to crack the skull of that upstart who was accusing me of

laziness while the stones were making my bones ache ; to shout in his face, ' Coward ! Coward ! ' And then ? Right is always on the side of the man who pays you. Saturday night came. I told the boss I intended to quit, and that he should pay me off. With ill-disguised rage he threw into my hands fifteen shillings, saying, ' Here's your wages and they are stolen.' I stood petrified with wrath. What should I have done to him ? Kill him ? What did I do to him ? Nothing ! Why ? Because I was hungry and had no shoes. I took the train for Lausanne."

He tramped around the city, hungry and ragged, staring at the well-dressed guests in the hotels, with burning hate in his heart. He slept under the arches of a bridge ; in the morning he begged a little money from an Italian compatriot of his and rushed to a baker's shop to buy some bread. He had not eaten for 26 hours.

And yet this early suffering and starving was like an alloy which strengthened his soul. He writes in his autobiography :

" These days of toil and pain hardened my spirit. They taught me how to live. For me

it would have been terrible if on my journey forward I had fallen into the chains of a comfortable Government job. These energies that I now enjoy were trained by obstacles and by bitterness of soul. They were forged by struggle ! ”

He held a great many jobs during his years of poverty in Switzerland. He was in turn a labourer, hod-carrier, butcher's man and errand boy. Not that he was continuously worked ; once they even arrested him for vagrancy.

Soon he formed contacts with the Italian Socialist Club at Lausanne, where he was introduced as a ' fellow comrade ' who had fled from Italy to escape compulsory military service. But he was no deserter ; in 1904 he returned voluntarily for his training. Now he took part in the fierce discussions held every night at the Socialist club. A little later he became a soap-box orator. Four months after he arrived in Switzerland he had risen to the post of secretary of the Italian Trade Union of masons and masons' helpers. Not quite eight months after that the canton of Bern expelled him for anarchist activities.

For two long years he proclaimed his ideals and convictions. He travelled to France, Germany, Austria, even Italy. In 1904 he was jailed and expelled from Geneva for staying there without a regular passport.

In the meantime he had met Angelica Balabanoff at the celebration of the thirty-third anniversary of the Paris Commune at Lausanne. She was interested in the unkempt young man and after her speech she enquired about him, was told that he had no job, no place to sleep in, and was always getting into scrapes. When she asked him whether she could help him, he replied in an almost hysterical voice that nothing could be done for him, he was sick, incapable of work or effort. But Angelica Balabanoff, the daughter of an aristocratic Russian family, felt a deep pity for the hollow-eyed young vagrant and when she found out that he could earn a few francs by translating a German revolutionary pamphlet, she helped him with his German. "It was obvious that he despised manual labour and I guessed that at least part of his wretchedness, his inability to adjust himself

to life among the *émigrés*, was due to the fact that in order to exist in Switzerland he had had to choose between vagrancy and the most humble occupations," writes the woman-agitator.

In June, 1903, Mussolini was expelled from the Canton of Bern for his revolutionary activities. A few months later he returned to Italy, but in January, 1904, he was in Switzerland again. About that time the Prefecture of Forli began to keep a secret police record of his activities. In March, 1904, he played a leading part at the Zurich congress of Italian Socialists in Switzerland. Next month he was declared a *réfractaire* or military draft-dodger in Italy and was expelled from the Canton of Geneva. And in September of the same year there was an amnesty in Italy for certain draft-dodgers.

Before this date he had been associated with Angelica Balabanoff, talking over his plans and ideals with her. "If Mussolini was ever sincere with any human being, I believe that he was with me," she states. She urged him to read, to study and lent him pamphlets and books. And sometimes he poured out his

passionate feelings with an almost embarrassing frankness. Once they walked together to the station in Lausanne where Miss Balabanoff was to take the train to Geneva. Mussolini pointed to the public garden they were passing and said :

“ Just after I came here I was living in the greatest misery. The comrades who had been able to help me were away or out of work. One day I passed this park, so wretched with hunger that I thought I could not live another day. I saw two English women sitting on a bench with their lunch—bread, cheese, eggs ! I could not restrain myself. I threw myself upon one of the old witches and grabbed the food from their hands. If they had made the slightest resistance I would have strangled them . . . strangled them, mind you. . . . Don't you think it would have been better if I had killed those parasites ? Why does not the hour of revenge arrive ? ”

Strange are the ways of fate and the destinies of men . . . Mussolini, the dictator, Mussolini, the Duce, Mussolini, the man who always tries to behave like his own statue . . .

he almost killed an old English lady in his devouring hunger. . . .

The Swiss, according to Angelica Balabanoff, took Mussolini more seriously than his own comrades. When he was expelled from Geneva, the Socialist Deputy Wyss denounced the decision in the Grand Council. But Mussolini was not expelled at Chiasso on the Italian frontier; he was permitted to leave by the Austrian border.

In Austria, as Mussolini wrote to Miss Balabanoff, he had achieved a certain success as a journalist. When he passed through Lugano on his return to Italy, Miss Balabanoff was living with a friend who disliked Mussolini intensely. "He is too self-centred to care either about the 'cause' or about other people," she said, almost in a prophetic way. But she cooked a good dinner for the ravenously hungry man; when the three of them were waiting for the boat to leave, Mussolini waved his arm towards the restaurants and hotels along the pier, crying: "Look! People eating, drinking and enjoying themselves. And I will travel third class, eat miserable cheap food. *Porca Madonna*, how

I hate the rich ! Why must I suffer this injustice ? How long must we wait ? ”

Although he had to wait for a little time, he did not wait for very long. . . .

* * * * *

On September 17th, 1904, King Victor Emmanuel, in anticipation of the birth of a successor to his throne (the present Crown Prince Umberto), issued a decree of amnesty to some categories of *réfractaires* who had not yet served their military time. Mussolini could now return to Italy without fear of punishment.

His secret police record contained the information : “ The 31st of December, 1904, having presented himself at the military district of Forlì, as inscribed in the first category of conscripts in arrears of the class of 1883, Mussolini is assigned to the tenth regiment of Bersaglieri stationed at Verona. On the 8th of January, 1905, left for Verona where the regiment is stationed. . . . On the 6th of September, 1906, arrived at Predappio, released from the tenth regiment of Bersaglieri.”

These twenty months Mussolini served in the ranks. He claims that he was an excellent soldier in every regard and this seems to be true. His military service was only interrupted by a swift and fatal illness of his mother—meningitis—and although he hurried to her bedside, he arrived too late. A thousand people of Dovia followed her coffin and for a long time Mussolini was inconsolable. He felt as if he had lost his zest for life, his only real support. His grief was deeply sincere, even if the Fascist allege that he used the opportunity of his mother's death to write a glowing, patriotic letter to Captain Simonetti of his regiment, saying: "It becomes women to wail and weep, but it becomes strong men to suffer and die, in silence, and rather than shed tears, to work and work along the path of good and to honour the memories of the family and those more sacred of the Fatherland, not with sterile lamentations, but with fine deeds."

Admirable sentiments, but strange coming from the Socialist agitator who denounced national boundaries, the Church, monarchy and all traditional institutions.

These twenty months in the Duce's life were

more or less eventless. He writes about them in his autobiography :

“ I liked the life of a soldier. The sense of willing subordination suited my temperament. I was preceded by a reputation of being restless, a fire-eater, a radical, a revolutionist. Consider then the astonishment of the Captain, the Major and my Colonels who were compelled to speak of me with praise ! It was my opportunity to show serenity of spirit and strength of character.

“ Verona, where my regiment was garrisoned, was, and always will remain, a dear Venetian city, reverberating with the past, filled with suggestive beauties. It found in my own temperament an echo of infinite resonance. I enjoyed its aromas as a man, but also as a private soldier I entered with vim into all the drill and the most difficult exercises. I found an affectionate regard for the mass, for the whole, made up of individuals, for its manoeuvres, and the tactics, the practices of defence and attack.

“ My capacity was that of a simple soldier ; but I used to weigh the character, abilities and individualities of those who commanded me.

. . . I learned in that way how important it is for an officer to have a deep knowledge of military matters and to develop a fine sensitiveness to the ranks, and to appreciate in the masses of our men our stern Latin sense of discipline and to be susceptible to its enchantments."

But even during his soldiering, Mussolini continued some of his revolutionary activities. While on leave for his mother's funeral, he had an interview with a republican deputy from Forli, which was published in *L'Avanguardia Socialista* on March 11th, 1905. During the same year his name appeared in the same paper as the translator of an essay by Kautsky.

When he was released from the army, Mussolini returned to his home in Predappio. A little later he went to Tolmezzo, a small town situated in the mountainous Friuli section of north-eastern Italy. Here he taught second-grade boys during 1906-07. When, in November, 1906, he took up his post, the Forli police sent a copy of their secret dossier of him to the Préfecture of Udine, the provincial centre in the vicinity of Tolmezzo,

informing them of the 'necessity for vigilance.'

Here he lived more or less quietly except for outbursts against religion. Gaudens Megaro, his most unbiased biographer, notes an episode which is rather characteristic :

" On February 17th, 1907, Mussolini joined the Socialists and anti-clericals of Tolmezzo in commemorating the martyrdom of Giordano Bruno, the Italian friar and philosopher, who was born at Nola and was burned at the stake in Rome on February 17th, 1600. The anniversary of Bruno's death, one of the great days in the Italian Socialist calendar, was the occasion for yearly anti-clerical demonstrations throughout Italy. According to the best contemporary report of the Tolmezzo meeting in honour of Bruno, the presiding officer asked Mussolini, the 'school teacher,' to speak. In his extemporaneous address, which lasted about three-quarters of an hour and received great applause, he brought out the rebellious and combative spirit of Bruno and described him as the 'greatest innovator of his time and the precursor of free thought.' After others had

spoken, all those present at the meeting paraded to the vicarage, singing the workers' anthem, and when they got there, they shouted: 'Long live anti-clerical France!' 'Long live the martyr of Nola!' A Tolmezzo correspondent of a clerical paper published at Udine was indignant that a teacher, who was being paid by the town, had participated in such a meeting. During the scholastic year, protests were made to the effect that a certain teacher was swearing in his classes; and while I cannot definitely say that the teacher was Mussolini, I am quite certain that it was he."

The man who cheered anti-clerical France is in strange contrast to the dictator of 1939 who demands French territory. The stranger the contrast when we consider that, in April, 1907, the University of Bologna granted him a licence to teach French in high schools!

In September of the same year Mussolini returned to his family. The secret police records say that he was 'being adequately watched.'

III

THE Duce himself does not mention his year at Tolmezzo in his autobiography. He gives exactly two sentences to the months he spent teaching in a private technical school connected with the Ulisse Calvi College, a private preparatory institution for boys at Oneglia : " I went to Oneglia as a teacher again, knowing all the time that teaching did not suit me. This time I was a master in a middle school."

Oneglia, a small town on the Italian Riviera, a few miles north of Genoa, had a Socialist weekly, *La Lima* 'The File', with whom G. M. Serrati, a prominent young Socialist, was closely connected. He befriended Mussolini who had now become a ' Professor,' a title of which he was rather proud, as a year later, in

answer to a judge's question as to his profession, he replied: "Professor of French language and literature."

Not that he found teaching attractive. Socialist journalism and propaganda interested him much more. The *Lima* needed contributors; a few days after his arrival in Oneglia he became almost a member of its regular staff. His first article was paying homage to the great Italian writer Edmondo De Amicis, the author of *Il Cuore*. He had been born in Oneglia and Mussolini connected his greatness with his 'social conscience.' But soon he was attacking the Catholic Church under the pseudonym '*Vero Erotico*' 'True Heretic', conducting long arguments with the local Catholic weekly *Il Giornale Ligure*. He passionately denounced Holy Communion, the Easter Holiday and Christianity, frequently lapsing into blasphemy. In June, 1908, the *Lima* announced the forthcoming publication of a pamphlet by the 'True Heretic' on the 'Mission of the Priest,' in relation to schools, women, children and the workers' movement, but it seems that it was never published.

At that time Mussolini could not understand revolution and social change except in terms of violence. George Sorel, the French theoretician of revolutionary syndicalism, was extolling the necessity for violence and Mussolini quoted him as an authority, showering scorn on the timid reformers who believed in legal methods and frowned on violence. In June, 1908, he addressed an open letter to the Police Commissioner of Oneglia and to Prefect Di Rovasenda, complaining of police supervision and the tyranny of being watched like a criminal. "O tools of all the police departments of Italy," he wrote rather highfalutinly, "know once and for all that, in the exercise of your functions, I detest you, and that, as citizens, I dislike you. All that you have done and will do henceforth will have no effect whatever in swerving me from the road which I have freely resolved to pursue."

About the end of June, 1908, thirty of his comrades gave him a farewell banquet. Tribute was paid to him by the lawyer Bruno, at that time Mayor of Oneglia, who said: "His own devotion and that of the Socialists of

Oneglia for him who had been able to sustain for about six months the noble journalistic battle against the adversaries." He expressed the wish of having him among 'us' soon and concluded by extolling Socialism.

"The guest answered him in sincere and heartfelt language."

* * * * *

The young 'professor' returned to his native village which he found in complete turmoil. The day labourers had revolted against the share-cropping small farmers. Mussolini joined the fray. "I have lived for some weeks in an atmosphere saturated with revolt," he wrote in August. "I have participated wholeheartedly in the struggle that marks another signpost in the forward march of the agricultural masses of Italy."

He censured the 'agrarian feudalism' in the Romagna and characterised the share-tenants as men perverted by the ideas of landlords and priests. But now the local authorities lost their patience. On July 18th he was arrested on the charge of having

threatened with 'grievous bodily harm' a 'scab' organiser Emilio Rolli.

He describes his arrest with characteristic violence and exaggeration.

"In the evening I was arrested and taken to Forli with an escort of half a squadron of cavalrymen! This extraordinary eagerness for my personal safety 'touched me'"

He was sentenced to three months' imprisonment, damages and costs, the restitution of the confiscated cane with which he was supposed to have threatened Rolli was ordered and a suspended sentence denied. But after spending about fifteen days in gaol, he was granted provisional liberty by the Court of Appeals of Bologna. In November his case came up in this court; his sentence was reduced to twelve days' imprisonment and it was also decreed that his conviction should not be recorded in the registry of those sentenced for a criminal offence.

But Mussolini continued his 'work.' In September he was sentenced to a fine of 100 lire for making a public speech without permission at Meldola. He did not pay the fine,

so he had to spend ten days in gaol a year later.

In November, 1908, the following item was added to his secret dossier which was now growing bulky :

“ November 12th, 1908. N.P./File Number/3041. November 12th, 1908, removed residence to Forli, Via Mazzini 27. Is adequately watched, the more because he is a fervent anti-militarist. . . .”

IV

AFTER his release from prison in July, 1908, Mussolini began to write for *Il Pensiero Romagnolo*, the Forli republican weekly. He published a long essay on Nietzsche, entitled 'The Philosophy of Force.' This was more a description and exposition of Nietzsche's principal ideas than a confession of his own personal reactions to them; but it showed that he was aware of the principal intellectual currents in contemporary Europe. The superb conception of the "superman," said Mussolini, is Nietzsche's "great creation," suggested perhaps by the "*tedium vitæ* . . . of our life, of life as it goes on in contemporary civilised societies where irremediable mediocrity triumphs at the expense of plant-man."

It is a curious fact that, after the Fascist 'March on Rome,' Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth,

the high priestess of a Nietzschean cult, acclaimed the Duce as the embodiment of her brother's ideal superman. . . .

The essay on Nietzsche also revealed that Mussolini had a thorough knowledge of German which he had begun to study with Angelica Balabanoff. This fact is supported by another study entitled 'The Poetry of Klopstock from 1789 to 1795,' which he published in the Italian syndicalist review *Pagine Libere*.

Beside his essay on Nietzsche, Mussolini contributed a few more articles to the *Pensiero Romagnolo* in the second half of 1908 and in the first month of the following year.

* * * * *

" . . . After a period off I went with Cesare Battisti, then chief editor of the *Popolo*. Later he was destined to become one of the greatest of our national heroes—he who gave his life, he who was executed by the enemy Austrians in the War, he who then was giving his thoughts and will to obtaining freedom of the Province of Trento from the rule of Austria. His noble and proud soul are always

in my memory. His aspirations as a Socialist patriot called to me. . . .

“ One day I wrote an article maintaining that the Italian border was not at Ala, the little town which in those days stood on the old frontier between our Kingdom and the old Austria. Whereupon I was expelled from Austria by the Imperial and Royal Government of Vienna.

“ I was becoming used to expulsion. Once more a wanderer, I went back to Forlì.”

This is the brief account Mussolini gives in his autobiography of the seven months he spent at Trentino. The Secretariat of Labour at that great centre of Italian irredentism had offered him the job of secretary and editor of its weekly paper. On January 22nd, 1909, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore* (‘ The Future of the Worker ’) announced his appointment. “ The selection could not be better, for Benito Mussolini, besides being a proved fighter, is a fervent propagandist, versed especially in the subject of anti-clericalism. He is a cultured young man, and to the great advantage of our movement, he has a thorough knowledge of the German language.”

But Mussolini found his new surroundings strangely unsuited to his temperaments. The Trentino district was chiefly agricultural and had little understanding for the Marxist theories. They wanted a gradual economic improvement in the living conditions of the working classes instead of a bitter class war. Mussolini soon realised that he could accomplish but little in his new position. On February 26th, 1909, he wrote a letter to his Romagnole friend Torquato Nanni, saying : " As for my future, I have no fixed plans. I am living, as always, from hand to mouth. . . . I have put advertisements in the newspapers offering myself as a private teacher of French. If I succeed in living by this means, I shall give up the secretaryship immediately."

However, he liked the city library of Trent where he could read foreign periodicals and newspapers ; also the latest works of foreign authors. Here he developed his literary talents by writing short stories, character sketches and feature articles ; he perfected his mastery of violent and abusive language. He had to live in a room in the poorest section of the

town with a daily menu of beans and polenta and wearing shabby clothes.

Besides editing the *Avvenire* he contributed to the Socialist daily *Il Popolo* and to the illustrated weekly *La Vita Trentina*, both owned and edited by Cesare Battisti. Six months after his arrival in Trent he became managing editor of the *Popolo*—a post he held little more than one month. For he had incurred the hate of both civilians and the clergy. He had been fined several times for violating the Press law. His enemies incriminated him in a bank robbery; on September 10th, 1909, he was arrested. To avoid any misunderstanding: he had nothing to do with the bank robbery, which cost the Banca Cooperativa of Trent three hundred thousand crowns; but everybody was suspect to the Austrian police and especially the Italian irredentists. With Mussolini's record he had little chance of getting a 'square deal.' His lodgings and his desk at the newspaper office were searched. He was tried by the Rovereto court on two charges; one, for inciting violence against the authorities of the state in a private letter to Mario Scotoni, the

editor of *L'Alto Adige*; and the other, for sending with the letter a number of *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore* which had been legally confiscated. The trial lasted about three hours and was held behind closed doors. He was acquitted but not released. At noon on Saturday, September 25th, he went on a hunger strike and refused to eat until he was set free. Next day in the afternoon he was taken secretly to the border. The order for the expulsion was carried out and his stay in Austria-Hungary came to an end. On the following day the Trentino Socialists held a general protest strike. In the meantime, a week after his expulsion, Mussolini went to Peri, an Italian town near the Austrian border where his friends from Trentino fêted him at a banquet.

At the end of the first week of October, 1909, Mussolini was again at Forli, joining his father who kept a rather unprofitable tavern. At this time the world of Socialism was in an uproar over the execution of Francesco Ferrer, the anarchist agitator who had tried to incite the masses to a revolt in Barcelona. Mussolini was one of the speakers at a public meeting ;

his oration incited the audience so strongly that they smashed the windows of the Bishop's Palace, set fire to a fence surrounding a monument and tore up the marble steps.

"The time had come to shake the souls of men and fire their minds to thinking and acting," Mussolini declares in his autobiography.

To achieve this 'great aim,' Benito Mussolini settled down. For the next three years, from the autumn of 1909 to the winter of 1912, he lived in Forli among his 'own people,' but in an atmosphere 'saturated with revolt.' Towards the end of 1909, about two months after he had been expelled from Austria-Hungary, he was asked to reorganise the federation of Socialist clubs in the electoral district of Forli and to edit a new Socialist weekly. He was twenty-six and this seemed to him a heaven-sent opportunity. And here he became the dominating leader . . . the Duce.

The title of his weekly, *Lotta di Classe* ('The Class Struggle') was rather revealing. It declared the intention of its editor: never to compromise, never to be content with any

moderate action or temperate view. The first number was published on January 9th, 1910, and Mussolini was its editor, manager, chief reporter and copy-reader. "I write the paper," he said proudly, "and I do it with my pen, not with my scissors."

This four-page weekly mirrored his views on many divergent subjects. Patriotism, militarism, reformist Socialism, the U.S.A., religion, Freemasonry, parliamentary government and the virtues of political assassination and violence were all discussed. It is rather singular that shortly after the '*Marcia su Roma*,' the collection of the *Lotta* for the years when Mussolini was its editor was withdrawn from the Forli public library and deposited at Rome in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later it was sent to Paris, but in the end regained by the Fascists who keep it under lock and key.

Besides being the editor of the *Lotta*, Mussolini was the leading officer and the principal orator of the Forli Socialist federation which involved an immense variety of duties. Although his salary was very modest, he never protested or complained about it.

And yet he was in great need of money in order to pay part of the hospital expenses for his father who was seriously ill and to support Rachele Guidi whom he had met while she was working in his father's tavern. Donna Rachele, a fine and modest woman of simple tastes, became Mussolini's 'companion' in 1909 or 1910; he lived with her, according to Gaudens Megaro, in a common-law union. Some time during the Great War there was a civil marriage, but it was not until Mussolini became Prime Minister in 1922 that there was a religious marriage ceremony.

* * * * *

In October, 1910, Mussolini delivered a fiery speech at the Italian Socialist Congress of Milan. Here he induced his comrades to declare that no Italian Socialist could be a Freemason (this strange idiosyncrasy he seems to share with his Nordic colleague, Adolf Hitler) and that no Italian Socialist could tolerate the religious practices of church marriage, baptism and communion, either for himself or for his children. It shows Mussolini's growing popularity that such a resolution

was adopted almost unanimously. Yet a little earlier he had been involved in a violent controversy with his own readers when he praised the anarchist who threw a bomb in the Colon Theatre of Buenos Aires. True, Mussolini praised the unknown man in controversy to all the tyrants and oppressors he enumerated, maintaining that force could only be answered by force. "Thiers never had any pity for the partisans of the Commune," he wrote, "yet one sees Socialists moved by the victims of the Colon Theatre. This one-sided sensibility of the Socialists shows to what extent Christianity is still alive in their souls. It is Christianity which has given us this morbid, hysterical and effeminate pity." And a year later when Stolypin was assassinated in Russia, he thundered: "The Russia of the proletarians is in festival and awaits the day when dynamite shall pulverise the bones of the Little Father whose hands are red with blood. . . ." He also defended the anarchists of the Sidney Street siege and culminated in the vitriolic, often-quoted slogan: "*The national flag is a rag to be planted on a dung-hill!*"

V

1911 brought strife and struggle, bitter denunciations and war—war between Italians and Turks over the possession of Tripoli. Mussolini declared that only economic gain was the motive of the Italian State's imperialistic attack in Libya. "Senseless and useless bloodshed," he shouted (and may have remembered his own words when he sent Italian soldiers to the arid wastes of Abyssinia or the bitter winter of Spain). Now was the time for the proletariat to show what it was able to do. Now the "millions of workers" who "are instinctively opposed to the African colonial undertakings" must rise and shake off the yoke. A general strike was proclaimed. It was more or less a failure, but in the Romagna and particularly Forli, where Mussolini organised, it caused serious trouble to the

Italian Government. Cavalry was called out. Street fighting, sabotage, arson followed. On the 29th September the war was declared ; about two weeks later, on October 14th, Mussolini was arrested with Pietro Nenni, the young secretary of the Forli republican Chamber of Labour, and another republican Aurelio Lolli. Mussolini had been arrested while drinking coffee at the Garibaldi Café of Forli. When they searched him they found in his pockets "much glorious poverty and nothing more !" They were brought to trial towards the end of November, 1911. Mussolini defended himself eloquently, he was sentenced to one year of imprisonment, but he spent only five months in prison. His appeal was heard on February 19th, 1912, when his sentence was reduced by seven months. On February 20th, Mussolini gave an interview to the *Avanti !* referring to the comrades who "feel solidarity with him in this hour of judicial reaction which strikes those culpable of opposition to the war undertaking."

No doubt his behaviour during the trial had added greatly to his popularity. In court

he had appeared "clean-shaven, eyes alive and scintillating; smartly dressed, even dapper. He speaks with his habitual precision, incisively." His final speech from the dock was logical and defiant: "If you acquit me, you will please me because you restore me to my work and to society! If you condemn me you do me an honour!"

The day following his release from prison on March 12th, 1912, a banquet was given for him by his Forli comrades. Various tributes showed the high regard in which he was held. The *Avanti!* wrote: "Comrade Mussolini left the prison this morning more Socialist than ever. We saw him in his humble home with his small family, which he adores, and we stayed a short while with him. He has not suffered at all physically because of his imprisonment. Numerous telegrams of congratulations and praise from every part of Italy have reached him."

The *Lotta* welcomed back its leader. And *La Soffitta* ('The Attic'), the weekly organ of the revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party, published an article signed with the letter 'V.' Here Mussolini was described as the 'Duce'

of the Forli Socialists. Perhaps this was the first occasion when this expression had been used about him. Yes, he was destined to become the 'Duce' of the Italian Socialist Party, the 'Duce' of the whole of Italy.

"The twenty-eight-year-old idol," writes Megaro, "of the numerically small but well-organised Forli Socialists, their 'Duce' now became a celebrity somewhat known beyond the confines of his province and familiar to the revolutionary leaders in the Socialist Party, was on his way to a great triumph—the editorship of the *Avanti!* the most important post in the Party." "It was not long before I was proclaimed the mouthpiece of the intransigent revolutionary Socialist fashion," Mussolini says himself. "I was only twenty-nine years old when at Reggio Emilia, at the Congress in 1912, two years before the World War began, I was nominated as director of the *Avanti!*"

It is greatly interesting to follow the events which led up to this important appointment. The Congress of the Socialist Party in 1912 was held at Reggio Emilia, a few miles from

Gualtieri Emilia, the small town where Mussolini had his first experience as an elementary school teacher in 1902. On July 8th, Mussolini delivered his great speech. It was a truculent and uncompromising oration ; but it was an oratorical success. Most of it was devoted to a violent arraignment of the Socialist Parliamentary Group. His resolution proposing the expulsion of the Socialist Members of Parliament, Bissolati, Bonomi, Cabrini and Guido Podrecca, was approved by a large vote.

Among the Socialists who praised him were Paolo Valera, the publisher and editor of a lively illustrated Milan weekly, *La Folla* (' The Crowd '), and Amilcare Cipriani, the famous Romagnolo ' red ' agitator after whom Mussolini received one of his baptismal names. Valera invited him to contribute to his paper and in August, 1912, Mussolini began to write for it under the pseudonym '*L'homme qui cherche*' (' The man who seeks '). Here he delivered a furious tirade against those hypocrites, mountebanks, tricksters and ' cartilaginous spirits ' in the revolutionary ranks who had betrayed their Socialist past in order to support Italy's war.

The Congress of Reggio Emilia sealed the first complete and sweeping victory of the revolutionary group in the Italian Socialist Party. They had gained control of two of the most powerful organs, the *Avanti!* and the Executive Committee. There was a third organ, the Socialist Parliamentary Group, which was still led by Turati, Treves and other moderate reformers. But Mussolini and his extremist comrades put the Group under the control of the Executive Committee, thereby hamstringing its independence and freedom of action.

Mussolini was elected to the Executive Committee, where he sat together with Angelica Balabanoff (who had transferred her activities to Italy). This was an instant recognition of his talents and of his striking success at the congress of Reggio Emilia.

After the congress Mussolini resumed his work in Forli. In October he became secretary of the Socialist federations of the electoral colleges of Forli, Cesena, San Arcangelo and Rimini. His name soon became known to the large Socialist public.

His great opportunity came almost

accidentally. At least his appointment as editor of the *Avanti!* forms a curious chapter in Miss Balabanoff's autobiography, well worth quoting.

“ ‘ I have a suggestion,’ said Lazzari, our venerated secretary, in one of the successive meetings of our Executive Committee. ‘ Let’s nominate one of our younger comrades—Mussolini, for instance. Why should the older ones always be selected? Besides, the whole Executive is responsible for our central organ and it is not important who is to be in Milan and considered its editor.’

“ The idea did not displease us. Only one member of the new Executive objected. ‘ I am a little afraid of Mussolini’s temperament,’ he declared. ‘ He is too egocentric.’

“ Upon hearing this objection Mussolini, who had not spoken until then, said in an irritated tone: ‘ Leave me alone. I have not the slightest intention of accepting the appointment. I am not capable of handling the job. I have no adequate Marxist background and I don’t want the responsibility.’

“ ‘ If the Party decides you are needed, and

if you are a true revolutionist, you will accept,' insisted Lazzari.

"Others then urged the appointment, Mussolini brooded in silence. I knew him sufficiently well to understand what was going on in his mind. Tempted and flattered as he was by the proposal, he hesitated because of the responsibility involved. The matter was still undecided when we adjourned for lunch. Mussolini and I lunched together. I tried to induce him to accept the proposal of the Executive, but his mind was apparently made up and he declared point-blank that he would not consider accepting. Upon the reconvening of the Executive Committee, however, his first words were: 'Well, I agree. But there is one condition: Comrade Balabanoff has to join the staff as co-editor.'

"I understood immediately the motivation behind this strange conduct. He did not want to renounce the honour which had been offered him, nor did he want the responsibility. He knew that as a member of the *Avanti!* staff I would help him, in fact, that I would assume complete responsibility when things went wrong, but that I would not attempt to

make personal capital from our successes. He knew also that, though I might help him, I would not move to Milan merely on his behalf; but if the Executive requested it, I—as a disciplined member of the Party—would comply. Hence this manœuvring.

“The first thing Mussolini asked me to do after we became editors of *Avanti!* was to write to the former editor, the late Claudio Treves, to the effect that he was no longer a member of the editorial staff, his post having been taken by myself. . . . Whenever Mussolini was called upon to face an unpleasant situation, to refuse an article, to dismiss a collaborator, encounter the anger of those to whom he had made promises which he had broken, he would ask me to substitute for him. . . .”

And so, not yet thirty, Benito Mussolini entered the highest stronghold of Italian Socialism—the editorial offices of *Avanti!*

VI

ON December 1st, 1912, Benito Mussolini became managing editor of *Avanti!* Just before he left Forli for his new office, he lost his father. Alessandro Mussolini was only fifty-seven at the time of his death. Mussolini paid tribute to him in his autobiography just as he did to his mother. "The Romagna," he writes, "a spirited district with traditions of struggle for freedom against foreign oppressions, knew my father's merit. He wrestled year in and year out with endless difficulties, and he had lost the small family patrimony by helping friends who had gone beyond their depth in the political struggle."

His father's death marked the end of the unity of the Mussolini family. Benito "plunged forward into big politics" when he settled in Milan. Arnaldo went on with his

technical studies, while Edvige married very well indeed and went to live with her husband in Premilcuore, a small place in Romagna.

Mussolini says about his work during these two years before the war: "I had worked hard to build up the circulation, the influence and the prestige of the *Avanti!* After some months the circulation had increased to more than one hundred thousand. . . . I then had a dominant situation in the Party. But I can say that I did not yield an inch to demagoguery. . . . I have never flattered the crowd nor wheedled anyone; I spoke always of the costs of victories—sacrifice and sweat and blood."

"I was living most modestly with my family, with my wife Rachele, wise and excellent woman who has followed me with patience and devotion across all the wide vicissitudes of my life. My daughter Edda was then the joy of our home. We had nothing to want. I saw myself in the midst of fierce struggle, but my family did and always has represented to me an oasis of security and refreshing calm. . . ."

In October, 1913, he was defeated as

Socialist candidate for Parliament, but this did not break his passionate energy. In his autobiography he gives a tense picture about pre-war Italy :

“ These years before the World War were filled by political twists and turns. Italian life was not easy. Difficulties were many for the people. The conquest of Tripolitania had exacted its toll of lives and money in a measure far beyond our expectation. Our lack of political understanding brought at least one riot a week. During one ministry of Giolitti I remember thirty-three. They had their harvest of killed and wounded and of corroding bitterness of heart. Riots and upheavals among day labourers, among the peasants in the Valley of the Po, riots in the south. Even separatist movements in our Islands. And in the meantime, above all this atrophy of normal life, there went on the tournament and joust of political parties struggling for power. . . .

“ I thought then, as I think now, that only the common denominator of a great sacrifice of blood could have restored to all the Italian nation an equalisation of rights and duties.

The attempt at revolution—' the red week '—was not revolution as much as it was chaos. No leaders ! No means to go on ! The middle class and the bourgeoisie gave us another picture of their insipid spirit. . . ."

This, of course, is the Duce's picture. Others paint a different one about his share in Italian politics from the time when he became managing editor of the *Avanti!* to the day when he was expelled from the Socialist Party.

* * * * *

On April 1st, 1914, he was acquitted of the charge of inciting to crime, vilifying the army and the Church and other lesser accusations. Twenty-seven days later he spoke at the Socialist Congress at Ancona, demanding the expulsion of Freemasons from the Socialist Party. In June he was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolutionary ' Red Week.'

Angelica Balabanoff writes about this violent period :

" During the Tripolitan War, a young anarchist soldier named Masetti had shot and wounded his colonel in the barracks at

Bologna. Fearful of executing the assailant because of the widespread anti-militarist spirit, the authorities had declared him insane. There had been continuous popular demands for his release ever since.

“ Finally, June 7th, 1914, was chosen as the day for a great popular demonstration on behalf of Masetti—a demonstration in which even the Republicans were to take part. It was agreed that if there were any acts of repression on the part of the police, a general strike would be called immediately. At one of the meetings at Ancona, three strikers were killed by the police. The general strike was declared and spread rapidly throughout Italy. It became so menacing that it seemed to some that Italy was on the verge of revolution. The week between June 7th and 14th saw the most violent disturbances in Italy since 1870, and the period was to be known thereafter as Red Week. During this period, while every resource of the Party was thrown behind the strike, Mussolini was in his element. One would have thought, from his accounts in *Avanti!*, that he was in the very thick of the fray—instead of issuing fiery editorials from

his office. When the strike was called off at the end of the week by the Confederation of Labour, Mussolini denounced the Labour leaders for this 'act of treason'."

But bigger and blacker clouds were spreading over the sky, the clouds of war. The murder at Sarajevo had set free the hounds of Mars and soon the whole world heard their baying.

And what did Mussolini, the anti-militarist, the internationalist, the fiery orator, do?

Here is a time-table of his chief actions from July to November, 1914. Facts speak for themselves and no interpretation could be more eloquent.

From July to October, Benito Mussolini was one of the originators and vigorous proponents of formula of 'absolute neutrality' for Italy in the war. A little later he advocated a formula of 'relative (or conditional) neutrality,' which meant that the Socialist position in the event of Italy's intervention should be determined according to the changing circumstances. There followed a passionate controversy in the Socialist Party regarding its neutrality stand.

On October 20th, 1914, the Party Executive Committee refused to adopt Mussolini's 'relative neutrality' formula. Thereupon he resigned the editorship of the *Avanti!*

Twenty-five days later he founded *Il Popolo d'Italia*, a daily at Milan, advocating Italy's intervention in the Great War on the side of the Allies, beginning a large-scale interventionist campaign.

On November 24th, 1914, he was expelled from the Milan Club of the Italian Socialist Party and five days afterwards the Party's Executive Committee ratified the act of the Milan Club.

Certainly an amazing sequel of events, showing a complete change in a man's outlook, ideals, personality. Latins are always quick to change in their loyalties—but this was extraordinary even for an Italian. Where lay the mystery? A great many explanations are possible. Two opposite views can be quoted: those of Mussolini himself and of Angelica Balabanoff, his assistant editor, former mentor and buffer towards the world.

Mussolini says in his autobiography about his 'sharp turn right':

“ War was ripe. The tardy and weak intervention both known and secret of the Pope and of the benevolent nations outside the circle of the Allies had no weight. They could not stop the procession of events. War began the first of August, 1914. It was full bloom of summer. Under the deep shadow of the cloud the people of old Europe stood in awe but fascinated as one is fascinated by a snake.

“ Italy a few years previously had renewed the Triple Alliance Treaty. It had been a marriage without respect and without trust, brought about more in order to counter-balance military power than by political necessity. . . . The Marchese of San Giuliano who was at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, faced by the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia and by the scheming to bring about war at all costs, had to play fast to keep Italy neutral. . . . We were kept in the dark as I well knew. . . .

“ . . . I watched England ; she was pondering deeply upon the step to take, and then, in order to keep her supremacy, and also for the sake of her pride and the sake of humanity, she moved her formidable war machinery

and quickened the organisation of new armies to snatch from Germany's grip the control of the old Continent.

" . . . The future, not of one nation but of many nations, was in the balance. Of this, in my editorial office, I was always conscious. . . . I could not bear the idea that my country might abandon those who were crushed under the weight of war and unwarranted misfortune. . . .

" Germany began to influence Italian public opinion with methods of propaganda that irritated the sensitiveness of our race. That enraged me.

" . . . But our nation was turning toward war. I was helping. The Socialist Party . . . stood for an absolute neutrality. . . . Among that Party there were many who stood openly in sympathy with Germany. I did not. . . .

" . . . I walked home to my family, to my home, at night with pregnant questions in my mind, with deepening determinations, with hardening resolutions. . . . I saw that Internationalism was crumbling. . . . I wrote an editorial in which I said also how utterly foolish was the idea that, even if a Socialist

State were created, the old barriers of race and historical contentions would not go on causing wars.

" . . . I was transformed in my thought.

" . . . The Socialist Senedrium, - seeing where I was going, took the *Avanti!* out of my control; I could no longer preach by that means intervention of Italy in the war. I faced the Socialists in our conventions. I was expelled. I held public gatherings.

" I created the Fascisti—a group of daring youth who believed that intervention could be forced. . . . I was their leader.

" . . . The World War began on July 28th, 1914. Within sixty days I severed my official connection with the Socialist Party. . . .

" I felt lighter, fresher. I was free! . . . But I understood that I could not use my convictions with efficient strength if I was without that modern weapon, capable of all possibilities, ready to arm and to help, good for offence and defence—the newspaper.

" I needed a daily paper. I hungered for one. I gathered together a few of my political friends who had followed me in the last hard struggle and we held a ' War Council.' . .

" . . . On November 15th, 1914, the first number of the *Popolo d'Italia* appeared. Even now I call this new paper my most cherished child ; it was only through it, small as was its beginning, that I was able to win all the battles of my political life. I am still its director. . . ."

These are most of the facts which Benito Mussolini presents in his autobiography. But there is another side to the picture—supplied by Miss Balabanoff.

She tells how on July 29th, when the Second International met at Brussels, the Italian Socialist Party had issued its anti-war manifesto. Among the signatories was Benito Mussolini, editor of *Avanti !*, member of the Executive and of the City Council of Milan.

There was a meeting called at Milan to reaffirm the position taken in this manifesto. During the discussion Mussolini, who had expressed himself in favour of absolute neutrality, came up to Miss Balabanoff, stated that he would have to leave the meeting before the discussion was ended and asked her to vote for him. This withdrawal provided him with a possible loophole. He could have always

claimed that if he had remained and had heard all the discussion, he might have voted differently.

The great majority of the Italian people in general were for neutrality. Mussolini, who always followed the stream, ran true to form in this matter. "While most of us were attempting to analyse for the workers the origin and meaning of the war, he was hurling epithets and attempting to prove that he was more revolutionary than the Party. . . ."

"The only way," says Miss Balabanoff, "in which to involve Italy on the side of the Allies was to make the war against Germany appear to be a *revolutionary* war. For this the Allies needed a demagogue who knew his revolutionary phraseology and who could talk the language of the masses. Such a man was to be discovered in the person of Benito Mussolini. . . ."

In August, Mussolini was still thundering against the war in *Avanti!* But by September there were rumours afloat that in private conversations with some of his friends he had indicated that he was ready to abandon

neutrality. He denied these rumours indignantly.

The numerous Allied agents, particularly from France, knew that they had to find a man who was still in 'good standing' with the Italian Socialists but who could be corrupted. Mussolini fulfilled these requirements. He was editor of the Party paper which was read by a majority of the workers throughout Italy. Through his personal friends who had already embraced the Allied cause, the Allied agents learnt all they wanted to know about Mussolini's weakness and ambition. Then Mussolini wrote an article in the *Avanti!* which provoked the Executive Committee to quick action. It is interesting to compare Miss Balabanoff's description of the following events with the curt explanation given by *Il Duce* himself :

"Mussolini had known that he would not be able to face the Executive and defend his article. He knew that at the first attempt to justify his new position he would betray himself for what he was—a traitor. He was afraid, not only of us, but of himself. We might appeal to his conscience, his past

pledges, his sense of duty, and so stir up sentiments or apprehensions which he was trying to suppress. Being too weak to answer our arguments or to resist the temptation of money and power, he had created a *fait accompli*—a situation which could not be cancelled.

“ . . . At that time we did not suspect that he had been corrupted. . . . We agreed that he could no longer remain editor of the *Avanti!* or a member of the Executive.

“ It is not true—as has been asserted—that Mussolini resigned from *Avanti!* and then tried to explain to us his new position. During that whole meeting he never uttered a single word of explanation, even when he was urged to do so.

“ ‘ How could you do it, Benito ? ’ our chairman, Bacci, asked. ‘ Why didn’t you talk with me about it ? You saw me every day.’

“ ‘ Why didn’t you resign when you realised that you were not in agreement with the Party policy ? ’ asked Lazzari.

“ A delegate from Turin said : ‘ I am a simple worker, therefore maybe I don’t understand. Can this be the same Mussolini who

aroused the Romagna peasants and workers against the African War?'

"It was my turn to speak. 'I warn you that you are betraying your class and the Party which redeemed you from moral and physical misery. You are betraying the faith which has made a man and a revolutionary of you, which has given you dignity and ideals.'

"He still kept his eyes turned from us.

"'Comrades,' I went on, 'before we part, I should like to have a temporary allowance made for Mussolini. Until he finds something else to do, we should provide for his family.'

"Then he spoke for the first time. 'I don't want your allowance,' he interrupted angrily. 'I'll find work as a stone mason. Five francs a day are enough for me. Of one thing you may be sure, I shall never speak or write a word against the Party. I would rather break my pen and cut out my own tongue. Whatever action you take,' he added, pathetically, 'I shall remain true to Socialism. You may deprive me of my membership card, but you will never be able to tear Socialism out of my heart—it is too deeply rooted.'

"When he spoke thus he had in his pocket

the contract for a sum of money to found his own daily paper—*Il Popolo d'Italia*—in which he was to attack the Party with the utmost bitterness. That paper is now the official organ of the Italian Government.

“ Even more contemptible than the role he played at the Executive session was his behaviour when he was summoned before the Socialist branch in Milan to which he belonged. . . . Instead of replying to the questions which were on the lips and in the minds of his audience, Mussolini, in order to gain sympathy, tried to pretend that he had had no hearing from the Executive.

“ ‘ Even a bourgeois tribunal gives the accused a chance to defend himself,’ he said. . . . Then he tried to divert the attention of the audience which was losing patience with his irrelevant remarks, by a meaningless phrase : ‘ You persecute me because you love me,’ he shouted.

“ . . . Mussolini tried one more subterfuge. He repeated the remarks he had made to the Executive about being faithful to the Socialism which was rooted so deeply in his heart.

“ ‘ If you proclaim that I am unworthy——’
he began.

“ The reply was a roar of ‘ Yes ! ’ from the audience. He left the hall in a rage.”

It is not for the author to draw his conclusions from the two accounts. Suffice to say that in February and March, 1915, Mussolini had two duels, one with the lawyer Libero Merlino, the other with the Socialist deputy Treves. Then, on May 23rd, 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary and a new chapter in Benito Mussolini's life began.

VII

THE war career of the Duce is a picturesque and even heroic one. He was conscripted in August, 1916. On the 27th of this month Italy had declared war on Germany. Less than six months later the Bersaglieri Private Benito Mussolini was severely wounded by a shrapnel when a shell exploded during trench-mortar practice. He was taken to hospital, first near the front lines and later in Milan. Six months passed again before he could leave it on crutches, resuming his regular editorial work on the *Popolo d'Italia*. He did not return to the front again.

But the war meant much more to him than wounds and discharge. "The war moulded me ; I was forced into its dramatic unfolding in the circumscribed viewpoint of a mere soldier of the war," the Duce says.

He had decided to be the best soldier possible from the first day when he would be allowed to wear again "the glorious grey-green uniform of the regiment of Bersaglieri—the best shock troops of Italy in which regiment I had already served during the time of my compulsory military service." He wanted to be an obedient soldier, faithful to discipline, stretching himself with all his might to the fulfilment of his duty.

His political position brought him a great many offers of privileges and sheltered places, but he refused them all. He asked the military authorities to be allowed to volunteer, but they turned him down. Volunteers, according to Italian laws, could be only those who had been rejected for physical unfitness or were exonerated for other reasons from compulsory military service.

Even so his turn came quickly. On September 1st he was conscripted and was sent to Brescia in Lombardy to drill. Soon he was dispatched to the "thick of the fighting on the high Alps." For a few months he had a hard time in the mountain stretches. "We still had nothing to soften our hardships, in

the trenches nor in the barracks. We were simply stumbling along. Short of everything—carrying on—muddling through. What we suffered the first months—cold, rain, mud, hunger! They did not succeed in dampening in the slightest degree my enthusiasm and my conviction as to the necessity and the inevitability of war.”

When he was chosen as an orderly for headquarters he refused; he wanted to be in the front line. In a few months he was promoted corporal. But he was not sent to the training school for officers; his political past bristled with black marks against him. He had one week of leave and returned to the trenches, remaining there for months. He spent some time in a military hospital at Cividale with typhoid; but after a brief period of convalescence he was returned to the Alps.

His battalion was ordered to an advance post on the Carso (Section 144) and Corporal Mussolini was detailed for special hand-grenade duty. His company lived only a few dozen yards from the enemy “in a perpetual

and sometimes, it seemed, an eternal atmosphere of shell-fire and mortal danger that would be our life for ever."

Mussolini kept in touch with his 'beloved child,' the *Popolo d'Italia*. He was "compelled from time to time to give out in the newspapers news concerning myself. This was in order to smash the suspicions of those persons who thought me hidden in some office distributing mail, and entertaining in my mind doubts on the possibility of our winning the war. I was compelled to offset this slander and to state over and over what I had done and what I was doing. I was then major-corporal of the Bersaglieri and had been in the front-line trenches from the beginning of the war up to February, 1917, always under arms, always facing the enemy without my faith being shaken or my convictions wavering an inch. . . ."

As he could not write under his own name, he used a *nom-de-plume*.

Then one morning, on the 22nd February, 1917, an unfortunate incident happened in the Italian trenches. One of their own grenades burst unexpectedly. Four soldiers died,

others were fatally wounded ; Mussolini himself received severe injuries. He was rushed to the hospital of Ronchi where slowly forty-four pieces of the grenade were extracted from his body. His flesh was torn, his bones broken ; he must have suffered almost inhuman pain, having twenty-seven operations in one month—all, except two, without an anæsthetic. It was a hard school of pain, but it hardened the future dictator's resistance and heightened his physical ' toughness.'

A furious bombardment destroyed part of the hospital. Most of the wounded were moved at once ; but Mussolini could not be transferred to another hospital. He was unable even to lift his hand. For days he was left in the half-ruined building, defenceless, racked by pain.

But his iron constitution defied all odds. His wounds began to heal. His pain abated. He received a batch of telegrams ; even the King of Italy visited him, little suspecting that in a few years he would welcome this major-corporal as his Prime Minister.

Some months later he was transferred to a military hospital in Milan. In August he began

to walk on crutches ; his limbs were still too weak to support his frame.

He was glad to return to his newspaper office. Russia had collapsed, creating a totally new situation in the course of the war. Mussolini set out to fight the Communist propaganda which was seeping into the country and to combat the defeatism which was growing in the Italians—never very enthusiastic about sustained war.

In October, 1917, there was the immense rout of the Italian army, the disaster of Caporetto which is probably the blackest page in modern Italian history. The Third Army was surrounded on the other side of the Isonzo. The north of the Venetian provinces was in danger of being cut off from the rest of Italy. And the Italians rallied for a last stand, helped by their Allies, English and American troops. Mussolini began an active campaign of 'Stand to a finish.' He demanded action against slackers and defeatists. He called for the organisation of a volunteer army, military rule in the north of Italy, suppression of Socialist newspapers.

The counter-attack succeeded. The winter

passed and Italians were still standing on the Piave. "In everyone there was the deep desire," Mussolini writes, "to efface the memory of the days of Caporetto. We were to go back—back where our brothers dead and alive were waiting for us! The remembrance of our dead, above all, was calling to us."

Spring and summer of 1918 more or less consolidated the Italian front and forced back the exhausted Austro-Hungarian troops. In October, fifty-one Italian divisions with three British, two French, one American and some Czecho-Slovak volunteers, made a decisive and final drive on the Austrian front. They succeeded in piercing it at Sernaglia; they pushed forwards toward Trento, Udine and the lower Piave. Italian troops landed at Trieste and occupied Trento.

Mussolini has much to say about the "full, undeniable victory for Italy in spite of the bankruptcy of Russia, and of the abominable work of slackers and professional destroyers of ideas."

He paints a glowing picture of victorious Italy.

" Victory . . . warmed our hearts and our souls. It exalted Italians and spurred them to higher work, honouring the dead as well as the living. From October to December, 1918, Italy seemed like a factory working at full blast in complete accord with progress. . . ."

But there was a fly in the ointment, a serpent in Paradise.

" It was in this great historical moment, Mussolini fulminates, " immediately after a victory achieved with untold hardship, that our young nation—younger as a nation than America—with traditions not yet seasoned by age, in spite of having thrown into the ardent brazier of the conflict, men and wealth, was treacherously deceived. Its fundamental trustfulness was played upon in the making of the Treaty of Versailles.

" This is the awful toll that Italy paid in the Great War : 652,000 dead, 450,000 mutilated, 1,000,000 wounded. There is not in our country one single family who, during the forty-one months of the war, had not placed in the holocaust, on the Altar of the Country, a part of itself. I know every day, ten years later, that the mutilated, the wounded, the

widows and orphans of war form a vast proportion of our population, inspiring respect and homage of the multitude."

The war left Mussolini unshaken in his self-assurance ; he had proved that he was indifferent to personal danger and physical hardship ; he felt that he was entitled to a decisive part in guiding the destiny of his country.

VIII

It was on the 23rd March, 1919, that Benito Mussolini founded the Fascist movement at Milan with an advanced radical programme.

The years 1919 and 1920 were dark and painful periods in Italian history.

It seemed as if these excitable Latins had opened the box of Pandora and were now trying to master the dangerous spirits they had liberated. The unity of the country was threatened, a general disillusion took hold of the people.

In January, 1919, the Socialist municipality of Milan sent a special mission to help its brothers in Vienna. Internationalism began to grow strong again. At Trieste the Socialist Pittoni played an important part in the reorganisation of the delivered city. Mussolini accused German and Austrian spies, Russian

agitators, mysterious subventions of corrupting the spirit of victorious Italy.

He smelled danger—danger to his country and danger to himself—coming from the ranks of the Party which he had forsaken. He had a handful of supporters and his newspaper. He clamoured for Dalmatia—but Dalmatia was given to the newly-formed Yugoslavia. He hotly denounced the Socialist procession arranged on the 26th February, 1919, in Milan, which demanded amnesty for the deserters and division of the land.

The *Popolo d'Italia* lived its life in intense polemics. There was a battle practically every day. The Via Paolo da Canuobio, where the editorial office was situated, was guarded by police or by detachments of carabinieri and soldiers. The members of the staff were guarded whenever they appeared in public. The authorities attempted to control all that the *Popolo d'Italia* was doing. The censorship was re-established.

Mussolini thought it necessary to organise the resistance against left-wing influence in Italy. He decided "after days and nights of reflection to make a call through the medium

of my newspaper for a full stop in the stumbling career towards chaos."

On the 23rd March, 1919, he laid down at Milan the programme of the 'Italian Fasci di Combattimento'—the fighting Fascist programme.

At the same time he declared: "We are positively against every form of dictatorship, from that of the sword to that of the three-cornered hat (the Church), from that of money to that of the masses."

The first meeting of the Italian battle-Fascists took place on the Piazza S. Sepolero in Milan, after lengthy discussions with the Milan Association of Merchants and Shopkeepers. A guarantee was given that no noise or disorder would happen.

Mussolini made three declarations. The first pledged "to uphold with all . . . energy the material and moral claims that will be put forward by the Associations of those who fought." The second pledged the Fascisti of Combattimento "to oppose themselves to the imperialism of any other countries damaging Italy." The third spoke of the elections that were to be held soon and threatened to

fight with every means "the candidates that were milk-and-water Italians to whatever Party they belonged."

The meeting also talked of organisation; it was decided that in every big town the correspondent of the *Popolo d'Italia* should be the organiser of a section of the 'Fasci di Combattimento,' with the idea that these groups should become centres of the Fascist ideas, work and action. The capital for the first expenses was advanced by the *Popolo d'Italia* and a central committee was formed to direct the whole movement.

The *Corriere della Sera*, the great Liberal newspaper, gave exactly twenty lines to the meeting.

IX

IN June, 1919, the Versailles Treaty was signed. For Italy it meant a "complete shattering of ideas." She lost—except for the port of Zara—the whole of Dalmatia. Fiume was contested. The colonial problem was solved for her in a negative way.

Prime Minister Nitti and his cabinet maintained that the Treaty was the best which could be attained for the country. The election law was revised, creating a proportional system. Aviation camps were demobilised; in August the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the painful episode of Caporetto was published, highly damaging to the prestige of the army. Mussolini's Fascists were isolated, attacked and derided.

At Fiume incidents had taken place between Italians and French; hostility grew toward

the Allies. A mixed corps of Allied troops was sent to the coveted port.

Gabriele D'Annunzio, that rather lush and theatrical Italian poet, decided to become a man of action. In his plans he had the support of Mussolini. His troops were mostly Fascists ; starting well-armed from Ronchi, they occupied Fiume at the moment when the English sailors were getting ready to evacuate it. The Italian Government denounced D'Annunzio and his legionnaires, but the author of *Il Fuoco* defied Nitti and his cabinet. Mussolini strongly supported D'Annunzio. The poet stuck grimly to his guns, although his soldiers were declared deserters and the city was blockaded.

At this date the Nitti Government decided to hold general elections, fixing their date for the 16th November, 1919, under the proportional system.

"The elections," writes Mussolini, "re-established, for a moment, an apparent truce. Every Party wanted to measure the masses and the groupings. The Socialists, who were speculating on the misfortunes of the war and were pointing to the danger of another war due

to the D'Annunzian enterprise, were the favourites. The Church, that in politics always has an ambiguous attitude, pressed on the action of the priests in the villages so that the Partito Popolare that had been created originally by the lay-Catholics, in service of the Church policy, might play the preponderant part in Parliament. The Liberals, Democrats and some Radicals built up a block that passed under the name of 'the forces of order.' They were changeable forces, without any ideal base and without precise aims. They were another grouping among groupings whose futilities I had observed for years."

Mussolini wanted his Fascists to try the chance of the elections alone. He refused to ally himself with any other Party, even the Nationalists. He knew that public opinion was against him and his followers, but he preferred to stand alone. The Fascists formed an electoral committee which had little financial means ; meetings were organised in the principal towns in Italy and especially in Milan.

At one of these meetings, in the Piazza Belgioioso, the Duce made some rather

interesting declarations. He said that revolutions were not to be denied *a priori*, they may be discussed, but Italians could not copy Russian Bolshevism.

"If a revolution," he said, "has to take place, it is necessary to make one typically Italian, on the magnificent dimensions of the ideas of Mazzini and with the spirit of Carlo Pisacane!"

It seems that he had already in his mind the plan of the '*Marcia su Roma.*'

At the elections on November 16th, the Fascists could not gain a single seat in Parliament. Mussolini himself was defeated by a large margin in Milan. It was only eighteen months later that he was elected.

These eighteen months—from November, 1919, to May, 1921—were filled with an intense, furious fight.

At the end of 1919, Italians were profoundly anti-Fascist. It was characteristic of the tone of Socialist newspapers that *L'Avanti!* Mussolini's former organ, published a short notice, saying: "A dead body has been fished up from the Naviglio." The Naviglio was the canal which cut Milan in two

According to the documents, *L'Avanti!* said, this was Benito Mussolini's political corpse. The Socialists even staged a mock funeral, passing under the windows of Mussolini.

The Socialists had gained 150 seats in Parliament. They ruled Milan. Only a handful of Fascisti, Arditis and Fiumean legionnaires resisted them. An incident was provoked, bombs were thrown, a few were killed and many wounded. Socialist members of Parliament demanded the arrest of Mussolini and his chiefs. But he was released after one day in prison; yet the Central Committee of his Party was broken up, many arrested, many disappeared.

Mussolini turned his editor's office into a regular fortress. The *Popolo d'Italia* was sequestered and censored every day; but it remained alive. Mussolini held meetings constantly. He had now his brother Arnaldo helping him in all his work.

D'Annunzio was still resisting at Fiume. His friend, the Duce, started to reorganise his scattered ranks. In October, 1919, the first international meeting of the Italian *Fasci di Combattimento* was held at Florence.

Among the speakers the Futurist poet, F. T. Marinetti, raised his voice for Fascism. Mussolini had come to the meeting from Fiume where he was conferring with D'Annunzio. After the congress he drove to his native Romagna. On his way his car, driven by Guido Pancani, a well-known pilot and athlete, crashed into the barriers of a level-crossing, and although he was unhurt, two of his companions were severely injured.

The beginning of 1920 brought new diplomatic conferences and new unrest. In January there was a post and telegraph strike and a long-drawn-out railway strike. Three cabinet crises always brought Nitti, whom the Fascists hated with all their might, back to power. Mussolini and his followers fought him with every means at their disposal ; fighting at the same time the Socialists and Liberals. Armed conflicts, assassinations, street fighting, were the orders of the day. Bombs were thrown and Mussolini himself was threatened with assassination. One of his would-be murderers, a young anarchist named Masi, came to him and threw himself upon his mercy ; he had repented of the task he had undertaken.

Tirelessly organising, delivering speeches, writing articles, he was gratified to see that the futile policy of Socialists and other left-wingers increased the number of his followers. The 1921 elections put him at the head of the parliamentary candidates with 178,000 votes. He was elected in Milan, Bologna and Ferrara. Thirty-five Fascists entered the House of Parliament. One of their first acts was to eject forcibly a Socialist deputy called Misiano. Mussolini himself made few speeches during the session. But his group made spirited attacks against the changing governments.

The pen and the sword served the Duce equally well. In October, 1921, he had a duel with a former Socialist comrade, Francesco Ciccotti. "He was the long hand of our Italian political masonry," Mussolini says. "After several assaults the physicians were obliged to stop the encounter, because my opponent had a heart attack. Shortly before that duel I had another with Major Baseggio over some parliamentary squabble."

It was in November, 1921, that Mussolini convoked in Rome a large Congress of the

Fascists. He felt that an organic structure of a Party was needed.

"That was a memorable meeting," the future Duce describes the congress. "Thanks to the number of the followers and the quickness and solidity of the discussions it showed the virility of Fascism. My point of view won an overwhelming victory in that meeting. The Italian Bundles of Fight were now transforming themselves. They were to receive the new denomination of Fascist National Party with a central directory and supreme council over the provincial organisations, and the lesser Fascist sections which were to be created in every locality. On that opportunity I wanted with all my desire to strip from our Party the personal character which the Fascist movement had assumed because of the stamp of my will. But the more I wished to give the Party an autonomous organisation, and the more I tried, the more I received the conviction from the evidence of the facts—that the Party could not have existed and lived, and could not be triumphant, except under my command, my guidance, my support and my spurs."

The workers were still fighting the Fascists, called now *Partito Nazionale Fascista*. The Bonomi government, successor of Nitti's and Giolitti's cabinets, tried in vain to create order and peace. The failure of the Banca Italiana di Sconto threw the whole country into a panic. The credit of Italy diminished rapidly. The man who was to save the country had to be a ruthless organiser . . . and a financial wizard. . . .

X

IN January, 1922, an Inter-Allied Conference was held at Cannes. Mussolini decided to go there to interview the great world politicians. But he found the Conference "clothed in an atmosphere of indifference." It only provoked a sudden ministerial crisis in France and Briand, whom the editor of the *Popolo d'Italia* interviewed, resigned suddenly.

Mussolini returned to Italy to carry on his fight and the organisation of his Fascists who grew rapidly in number. On January 17th, 1922, they held a meeting at Trieste, demanding the recall of Salata who was one of the High Commissioners of Italy in the border zones. Their campaign succeeded, but they still complained about Italian indifference to the problems of the frontier districts. Then, on January 22nd, the Pope Benedict XV

died ; he was a great pacifist and therefore not a sympathetic character in the eyes of of the Fascist.

After the fall of the Bonomi ministry, events marched rapidly. In May, 1922, Mussolini had another duel with the journalist Mario Missiroli. Five months later, on October 24th, 1922, he threatened a Fascist march on Rome. Three days after he uttered his threat the weak Facta Ministry resigned. The mobilisation for an armed Fascist march on Rome was begun. And on the 29th October, 1922, the King of Italy asked Benito Mussolini to form a cabinet. . . .

* * * *

When Bonomi resigned as Prime Minister, Mussolini was called twice to the Quirinal. " Obvious reasons of reserve forbid me to make known what I said to the Sovereign," he says in his autobiography ; his demands were probably too extravagant. The political crisis continued. Bonomi was appointed Prime Minister again, only to fail a second time when he presented his cabinet in Parliament. New consultations began. At last the Facta Ministry was formed ; the Prime Minister

was an old veteran of Parliament, a pupil of Giolitti who had been a Minister of the Treasury. He tried to restore order in a country torn by internal strife where every few days a Socialist or a Fascist was murdered. Italy in these months resembled pre-Hitler Germany where Communists and Nazis waged ruthless war on each other.

The first of May brought the Festival of Labour and also new clashes between left wing and right wing. On the 24th of the same month one man was killed in Rome and twenty-four were wounded. The Alliance of Labour, a coalition of the anti-Fascist groups, proclaimed a general strike. Mussolini did not hesitate to order the general mobilisation of the Fascists. The strike ended in an atmosphere of terror and distrust.

On July 12th a statement announced that the Italian budget had a deficit of six milliards and a half lire, a terrific amount for Italy. Seven days later in Parliament, Mussolini withdrew the support of the Fascists which he had granted at first to the Facta Government.

"Your Ministry cannot live," he addressed

himself to the Premier, "I might better say, vegetate or drag its life along, thanks to the charity of all those who sustain you. The traditional rope in the same manner sustains the not less traditionally hanged. After all, your makers are there to testify to the character of your Ministry ; you have been the first to be surprised into the Presidency of the Council."

The same day the Facta Ministry fell. A deadlock arose. The organisation of the Labour Confederation, the Socialist Parliamentary Group, the Democrat groups and the Republicans declared a general strike all over Italy—to save the country from Fascism.

Mussolini ordered another general mobilisation of his followers. The Council of the '*Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*' was in permanent session. There was an assault in Milan on the *Avanti!* ; the Fascists burned the offices of the former newspaper of their chief. They occupied the street car barns, took possession of the electric stations in order to crush the strike. Mussolini was called again to the King, he had some interviews with the veteran Orlando. Facta was again

selected for Premier; he offered a share in the Government to the Fascists, but Mussolini again demanded too much.

The march on Rome was decided then and there.

On October 16th Mussolini called to Milan a general who was among his loyal followers. They created a plan of military and political organisation on the model of the old Roman legions. The Fascists were divided into *principi* and *triari*; a slogan, a uniform and a watchword were designed. Mussolini planned to march on Rome along the Tyrrhenian Sea, deviating toward Umbria. The south would join him in compact formations. Ancona only represented a hostile centre; but he sent Arpinati and other leaders. Ancona was "conquered by manœuvres carried out in perfect military fashion. There were some dead and wounded. Too bad! But now the remnants of the anti-Fascist forces were destroyed. Anti-Fascism was now concentrated in Rome, it was driven back to its barracks on Montecitorio 'where Parliament sat!'"

The *Popolo d'Italia* had become the head-

quarters of preparation. The military and the political forces both obeyed Mussolini's command. At last the necessary orders were given. Extensive 'preparatory manœuvres,' the occupation of Trento, Ancona, Bolzano, began.

Then the Duce delivered four speeches in different parts of Italy. Meetings were held in Udine, in northern Italy, in Cremona, in the Valley of the Po, in industrial Milan and in Naples, the centre of southern Italy. As Mussolini writes: "I was acclaimed as a conqueror and a saviour. This flattered me, but be sure that it did not make me proud. I felt stronger, and yet realised the more that I faced mountains of responsibility. In those four cities, so different and far from one another, I saw the same light!"

The chiefs of the Fascist movement and of the squads of action, Michele Bianchi, De Bono, Italo Balbo, Giuriati and others, were called together in Florence. A quadriumvirate of action was formed; Mussolini presiding over them. General concentration headquarters were chosen in Perugia, capital of Umbria, from where it was easy to reach

Rome. In case of failure they could cross the Apennine range and retire to the Valley of the Po.

When everything was ready, Mussolini published his proclamation of revolution, which was signed by the quadriumvirate. The historic document said :

“ The time for determined battle has come ! Four years ago the National Army loosed at this season the final offensive which brought it to Victory. To-day the army of the Black Shirts again takes possession of that Victory which has been mutilated, and going directly to Rome brings Victory again to the glory of that Capital. From now on *principi* and *triari* are mobilised. The martial law of Fascism now becomes a fact. By order of the Duce all the military, political and administrative functions of the Party management are taken over by a secret Quadriumvirate of Action with dictatorial powers.

“ The Army, the reserve and safeguard of the Nation, must not take part in this struggle. Fascism renews its highest homage given to the Army of Vittoria Veneto. Fascism,

furthermore, does not march against the police, but against a political class both cowardly and imbecile, which in four long years has not been able to give a Government to the Nation. Those who form the productive class must know that Fascism wants to impose nothing more than order and discipline upon the Nation and to help to raise the strength which will renew progress and prosperity. The people who work in the fields and in the factories, those who work on the railroads or in offices, have nothing to fear from the Fascist Government. Their just rights will be protected. We will even be generous with unarmed adversaries.

“Fascism draws its sword to cut the multiple Gordian knots which tie and burden Italian life. We call God and the spirit of our five hundred thousand dead to witness that only one impulse sends us on, that only one passion burns within us, the impulse and the passion to contribute to the safety and greatness of our Country.

“Fascisti of all Italy! Stretch forth like Romans your spirits and your fibres! We

must win. We will. Long live Italy ! Long live Fascism !

THE QUADRIUMVIRATE."

The same night news of the first bloody clashes arrived from Cremona, Alessandria and Bologna. Mussolini put on his black shirt and barricaded the *Popolo d'Italia*. He had well provided his offices with everything for defence against attack. There was a short siege, but a major of the Royal Guard asked for a truce which was granted. At night leading politicians of Milan came to Mussolini and asked him to desist from a struggle which might be the beginning of a civil war. Mussolini refused to budge an inch. He showed his visitors a letter from D'Annunzio who encouraged him in glowing words. Facta, the Prime Minister, wanted to proclaim martial law, but the King refused to sign it.

There were urgent conferences. The Fascists were already near the gates of Rome while Mussolini still stayed at Milan.

In the afternoon of the 29th he received a very urgent telephone call from Rome. General Cittadini, the first aide-de-camp of the King, asked him to come to the Capital ; His

Majesty wanted to entrust the Duce with forming a Ministry. Mussolini thanked him for the invitation but asked for confirmation in writing. A telegram arrived after a few hours.

"I was in a terrible state of nervous tension," Mussolini confesses. "A period of greater responsibilities was going to begin for me. I must not fail in my duty or in my aims. I gathered all my strength to my aid, I invoked the memory of the dead, I asked the assistance of God, I called upon the living faithful to assist me in the great task that confronted me."

On October 30th, 1922, Benito Mussolini formed a coalition ministry. He was Prime Minister; there were fifteen Fascists, three Nationalists, three Liberals, six *Popolari* and three Social Democrats in his Cabinet; not a complete victory, but a decisive step forward. Armed Fascist squads began to enter Rome. Mussolini took up lodgings at the Savoy Hotel and began to work.

On the next day he and the members of his Cabinet took the formal oath of office. One hundred thousand Black Shirts paraded before

the King. At his side stood Mussolini who had now in truth become *il Duce*, the leader of his Party *and* of his country.

XI

At least in the beginning the new Prime Minister tried to keep his rule within the constitutional framework. He did not give the order for his three hundred thousand armed men to march on the Capital. There was no need of that ; the power had become his for the asking. He forbade reprisals against the leaders of the opposition. For the time being he discarded the idea of a Fascist dictatorship because he wanted " to give the country the impression of a normal life. . . . I decided then . . . to compose a Ministry of the Nationalist character."

He included in his Cabinet Armando Diaz, the famous general, as Minister of War. Of the Fascists who later played an important part in the ' rebuilding of Italy,' Alberto De Stefani, Giovanni Giurati, Giacomo Acerbo, Constanzo Ciano and Cesare Maria De Vecchi

were selected as Ministers and Under-Secretaries of State.

The Quadriumvirate issued an order of demobilisation for the Fascist squads. Mussolini sent a telegram to D'Annunzio and warned the Prefects of the different districts of what he would expect from them. "I demand that all authorities from the highest to the least discharge their duty with intelligence and with complete yielding to the supreme interests of the Country."

A little more than a fortnight after he became Prime Minister he summoned the Chamber of Deputies "to render an account of what I had done and to announce my intentions and programme."

Mussolini delivered a speech and, as he says—with an exceptional absence of self-consciousness—it was "brief, clear, energetic." He said among other things: "I could have made of this dull and grey hall a bivouac for corpses. I could have nailed up the doors of Parliament and have established an exclusively Fascist Government. I could have done those things but at least for a time I did not do them."

This was a hardly veiled threat and in face of it no wonder that on the 25th November, 1922, Parliament granted the Duce extensive and exceptional powers to the Mussolini Ministry. After that—as the Duce says himself—“deeds and actions, more than any useless subjective expressions, write my true autobiography.”

He made a decree of amnesty—but he still had his own Fascists at his hands who had to be restrained and disciplined just like the S.A. and S.S. men of Herr Hitler. He could not disband them—nor could he keep them in their present formation. And so a ‘voluntary Militia for National security and defence’ was created. It was to be commanded by seasoned veterans and chiefs who, after having fought the War, had known and experienced the Fascist struggles.

A little later the Fascist Grand Council was organised, which was to be outside and above the various old political mechanisms. It was a body of reference, the propelling element of Fascism. Mussolini praises it highly. “The Grand Council has always succeeded. I preside over it, and let me add,

as a detail, that all the motions and the official reports which had appeared in the papers in concise form have been written by my hand."

Then came the unification of the police forces. The Royal Guards, created by Nitti were suppressed, although their suppression had a number of 'unfortunate incidents' as a consequence. Disturbances started at Milan and in Turin. But, as Mussolini says, "the immediate dissolving of an armed body of forty thousand men cost only four dead and some tens of wounded."

The next step was the realisation of Mussolini's deep-rooted anti-masonic policy. He denounces it violently. "We must not forget that this shady institution with its secret character has always had in Italy the typical character of briber and blackmailer."

Early in 1923 Mussolini united the Nationalist Parties with Fascism. The blue shirts of the former and the black shirts of the latter became 'united in a perfect chivalrous sentiment and political loyalty.'

In April, 1923, the 'Popular Party' held a congress in Turin, the majority voting in

favour of a policy with an anti-Fascist leaning. Of course the ministers in Mussolini's Coalition Cabinet, belonging to the Popular Party, had to resign and the Duce appointed his own Fascists in their places. The Treasury, the Ministry of Work and Social Providence, the Under-Secretaryships of the Foreign Office, the Liberated Provinces, Justice and Industry and Commerce came into the hands of Black Shirts. Labour Day—the 1st of May—passed without any serious incidents. Mussolini visited important cities and provinces of the country, testing public opinion before he took his next steps.

A new electoral law was put into effect, annihilating the old proportional representative system. There were still anti-Fascist assaults and ambushes, when elections were announced for April 6th, 1924.

Before that the Duce had to solve his first international conflict. Italians were assassinated on the Albanian-Greek border. When he failed to get the expected satisfaction, he ordered occupation of Corfu as a measure of retaliation. But after he exacted satisfaction he gave orders for the evacuation of the island,

thereby gaining a minor triumph without bloodshed.

On January 27th the great goal for which D'Annunzio fought was accomplished and the power of the *fait d'accompli* proved once more—Fiume was annexed by Italy. On March 16th the King of Italy was received solemnly in the important sea-port. Six days before that Mussolini had made another useful acquisition: Great Britain relinquished to Italy the Giuba territory in Somaliland.

The elections, at last, brought a 'decisive victory' for the National list. It obtained five million votes while the other Parties did not poll more than two million altogether. Mussolini stayed at Milan, directing the political battle. When he returned to Rome, he addressed his 'people' from the balcony of the Palazzo Chigi, proclaiming his faith: "let Parties die and the Country be saved!"

On May 24th Parliament was opened. After some days the usual parliamentary discussions began. On June 7th Mussolini delivered a speech, demanding the support of the right-wing Parties and denouncing the Socialists.

In the same month the Socialist deputy, Matteotti, was murdered.

The battle is still raging around this mysterious murder, but it seems more or less proved that it had been perpetrated by Fascists. Mussolini himself does not deny it. To quote his own words: "The Socialists were looking for a martyr who might be of use for their oratory and at once, before anything definite could possibly be known, they accused Fascism. By my orders we began the most anxious and complete investigation. The Government decided to act with the greatest energy, not only for reasons of justice, but also to stop, from the first moment, the spreading of any kind of calumny. I threw the Prefect and Police Chief of Rome, the Secretary of the Interior, Finzi, and the Chief of the Press Office, Cesare Rossi, into the labour of clearing the mystery. The work of the Police for the discovery of the guilty persons was ordered without stint. Very soon it was possible to identify the guilty. They were of high station. *They came from the Fascist group**

*The author's italics

but they were completely outside our responsible elements."

Arrests were made, but it did not still the storm. For the next seven months there was widespread unrest and growing opposition to the Fascist rule. But Mussolini—at least Gaudens Megaro says so: "is a master of the art of political deception. The day after the Matteotti murder in June, 1924, when he was at the most critical point of his career as head of the Fascist Government, he solemnly promised to 'normalise' the situation in Italy. So sincere and convincing did he appear that many Italian Liberals, including several Liberal members of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, helped to give him a new lease of power. Once he had emasculated and disarmed the opposition, he set out creating the Fascist totalitarian state. . . . He was . . . not in the least moved as a man when members of his Party butchered Matteotti. He was furious over this murder, not because it was a crime, but because he deemed it to be a political blunder which might cost him his power. . . ."

This may or may not be so; but it is sure

that Matteotti's death led to unrest and this unrest and revolt against the Fascist Government led to the beginning of the Fascist totalitarian state and the suppression of opposition. Officially this period began on January 1st, 1925—and has lasted to the present day.

XII

THREE Liberal Ministers resigned ; Mussolin replaced them with Fascists. ' Victory was complete.' A law against secret societies was introduced. Another was prepared on Public Safety, the governorship of Rome was instituted and a fight against the famous Sicilian *Maffia* was begun which has gone on intermittently up to the present day—with the honours mostly on the Duce's side.

In February, 1925, he was taken ill and it was feared that he would die. But his iron constitution triumphed over the illness and at the end of March he was able to take part in the festivals of the 6th anniversary of Fascism. The next year brought three attempts against his life. Zanziboni was a Socialist who hid himself in a room of the Hotel Dragoni just in front of the Palazzo

Chigi; he had an Austrian rifle, well-suited for a 'long shot.' He was arrested, dramatically, almost at the last moment and a number of persons—among them the General Capello—were also apprehended at the same time as they were implicated in the plot.

The second attempt was made in April, 1926, when a half-crazy English woman fired at Mussolini when he was inaugurating the International Conference of Medicine. The bullet wounded his—nostrils. The Duce showed some magnanimity and diplomatic tact when he had her simply expelled from the country.

The third assassin was Lucetti who hurled a bomb at Mussolini's car when he drove through the Via Nomentana to the Palazzo Chigi. The bomb was thrown back by the chassis of the car and exploded behind it; several people were wounded but the Duce escaped unhurt.

On October 31st, 1926, there was one more attempt. A young anarchist fired at the passing Duce in Bologna. He was lynched by the crowd; his bullet had just singed Mussolini's coat. He certainly must have a

charmed life to escape so many attempts on his life.

Rather ironically it was in the same month of the same year that Italy concluded a treaty of friendship for the period of six years with—Abyssinia.

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Hard work and some play—this is the slogan of the Duce's life. No doubt he has done a great deal for his country. The beggars have vanished from the streets of the Italian towns which they had infested for so many centuries. Marshland has been reclaimed and new cities born: in the place of the dreary moors the waving expanse of wheat shines. The *Dopolavoro* gives cheap recreation and opportunity for physical training to the poor man. Wonderful motor-roads have been built all over the country. Grandi and Balbo, two of Mussolini's most talented followers, did wonders at their respective posts. If the finances were a little shaky, Italy had never been a rich country and the money was spent at least in constructive work. Fascism showed its ugliest aspects

in its foreign policy ; at home it partly worked miracles and partly functioned smoothly, normally.

In May, 1927, preparations were started for the conquest of Tripoli. In October the Italian High Command was formed in Sirta with Marshal Ciconetti in charge. Mussolini had decided that Italy wanted colonies—wanted them more than any other country in the world. He had prepared his expansion by a series of skilful pacts.

After Greece was brought to task over the Albanian affair, he concluded a treaty in January, 1924, with Pasic, the Prime Minister, and Nincic, the Foreign Secretary of Jugoslavia. In 1925 the Nettuno Conventions were prepared, guaranteeing good neighbourly relations.

In December, 1924, Mussolini had long talks with Austen Chamberlain, then Foreign Secretary of Great Britain. The next year saw him at loggerheads with Afghanistan over the murder of an Italian engineer ; but things were smoothed over.

Italy went to war in Tripoli early in 1928. On January 4th General Graziani began

moving his troops and had several minor triumphs over the rebels. Six weeks later, on the 16th February, General De Bono, Governor of Tripoli took formal possession of the vanquished territory. In the same month Graziani occupied the district of Djifa. The same month saw successful operations around Cirenaica. The Libyan colony had been reduced during the War to the occupation of the coast and some of the principal cities. Now Libya had been reconquered as far as Giarabub and the Tripoli as far as the international border. A great deal of settlement organisation has been going on in these territories.

One of the Duce's main achievements was the concordat which he concluded in February, 1929. For long decades the Italian State and the Vatican had been living in a state of polite but decided enmity. Mussolini, the former anarchist and free-thinker, changed this. The Papacy was a power which he could not ignore and which he wanted to utilise for his own ends. In the latter he failed, but he brought to an end a situation which was growing more or less unbearable.

Then came the war which added a new country to Italy's possession, created the Axis and more or less killed the League of Nations; which brought about a complete re-grouping of powers and made Fascism a world menace—the conquest of Ethiopia.

XIII

A FAIR-SIZED library has been written about the Abyssinian War and its international ramifications ; but the limitations of this book hardly permit more than a cataloguing of the principal facts.

In January, 1934 Italy began her military preparations against Abyssinia ; this work went on through the whole of the year.

In October an attack was made against the Italian consulate at Gondar ; the Italians had become increasingly unpopular in Ethiopia. Four days later King Alexander of Yugoslavia was assassinated at Marseilles. Although the mystery of this dastardly murder has never been wholly uncovered, some of the threads led to Italy. Yugoslavia and Hungary almost went to war but Italy intervened and the League of Nations ' smoothed

matters over.' Laval, French Foreign Secretary, said that "we had touched war with our elbows." On December 5th some Italians were murdered at Ual-Ual in Abyssinia and the justification for the war was found.

On January 7th, 1935, France signed a treaty with Italy recognising her right to occupy Abyssinia. This treaty sealed the fate of the Njegus and his country; it also put France in a difficult position when her traditional ally, Great Britain, objected so strongly to the Italian plans. In the same month the first troops were sent off to Ethiopia. General De Bono took over the governorship of Italian East Africa. During the year Italy sent half a million men, fifty thousand pack-horses and mules, ten thousand motor-cars and an immense amount of armaments to East Africa. In April the General Command was formed. It sounds almost tragi-comic to remember that as late as May 25th, 1935, Abyssinia concluded an agreement with Egypt about the building of locks on Lake Tana.

War began 'officially' on October 2nd.

For the first fortnight fighting went on on the Eastern front ; but at the same time attacks started in the North. Within thirteen days the Italians conquered Adua, Adigrat and Aksoum, more than vindicating their defeat of forty years ago. On the Southern front they occupied Scillave. In the middle of the month Marshal Badoglio was sent to Ethiopia to study the position. The last week of October saw the beginning of the second Italian offensive on the Northern front. A week later their third attack began and they managed to reach—after some hard fighting—Makale. The Abyssinian War Council decided to defend the country to the ‘last drop of blood.’ De Bono whose methods were found ‘much too slow’ by Mussolini was robbed of his command and Badoglio set in his place. The Marshal began his work by organising fortifications and communications in the first place ; his Chief of Staff, General Gabba, devised a plan on a grand scale to secure his armies against flank attack and create a steady system of supplies. Badoglio was still in Italy when the Abyssinian War Council met at Djidjiga and decided to launch a counter-

attack immediately. On the last day of November Badoglio arrived at Adigrat. Mobilisation was carried out by the Abyssinians quite efficiently, but during the same month General Graziani proceeded in the Fafan valley and took Gorahei. Even so Italian victory was still far off; on the 10th December Badoglio issued orders which commanded defence for the time being instead of attack. Four days later the Italian General Headquarters were transferred to Enda Jesus, near Makale. The troops of Ras Imru crossed the Tacazze river and pressed on towards Erithrea. There were heavy fights in the district of Seleclaca. The next ten days brought sharp skirmishes near Abbi Adi, forcing the Italians to fall back on their main lines. On the 23rd December, the fighting was sharpened near the Af Gaga pass and Badoglio had to ask the Duce to send him two more regiments. Five days later the vanguard of the two regiments arrived—but success was still far away.

In the meantime the League of Nations had more or less outlawed Italy and forbidden any of its members to supply oil and petrol

to the Fascist country. Laval and Hoare devised some sort of peace project which was refused both by Italy and Abyssinia ; Hoare resigned then, making way for Anthony Eden who certainly could not be accused of sympathising too much with Mussolini. An Anglo-Greek pact was signed against Italy.

1936 dawned with the second mobilisation of the Abyssinians. Badoglio reported to Rome that he had to postpone his attack. But on the 15th January he moved some of his troops. Fighting went on in Tembien, on the Abaro Pass and the Lata Mountain. General Graziani pressed on towards Neghelli and defeated Ras Desta in a great battle. On February 1st Badoglio still reported that he would attack only later, but ten days later the Battle of Enderta began, lasting nine days. Ras Mulugeta, the Abyssinian leader, was defeated and the Italians took the Amba Aradam Mountains ; the fleeing enemy troops were pursued by aeroplanes. Prince Mulugeta was killed by the Gallas during his headlong flight.

Another big battle was fought between February 17th and March 6th, at Tembien,

when Ras Kasa and Seyum were defeated. At Sire, Ras Imru and Aialeu Burru were forced back beyond the River Tacazze. On March 4th, Badoglio made his plans about further progress; the conquered territories were put under the authority of the different regimental commanders. Between the 16th March and the 14th April, Italy progressed well on the Northern front. Sardo, Gondar, Nogari, Debarech and Socota fell. The end of March and the first two days of April saw the Negus defeated at Lake Asanghi. The Emperor of Ethiopia left his country with his treasures and hoard of gold. The Italians took Dessie.

In the middle of April Graziani was detailed to take Harrar and Diredaua and thereby cut the only railway crossing the country. Next day Badoglio moved with his staff to Dessie and nine days later started with motorised troops to take the Abyssinian capital. The terrible roads made progress very difficult. But the district of Lake Tana, the cities of Gadabi and Debra Tabor were taken. On the 4th of May the Negus embarked in Djibouti, going first to Palestine and then

to England where he more or less settled down. The next day Badoglio reached Addis Ababa in the afternoon. There was great disorder in the Abyssinian capital, plundering and street-fighting, but the Italian troops soon created order. When Graziani occupied Diredaua and contacted the Northern Army, the conquest of Abyssinia was more or less finished, apart from 'mopping up' operations. Vittorio and Bruno Mussolini, the two sons of the Duce, had served as flyers and the Duce himself visited the new 'colony.' Like Disraeli, he had made an Emperor of his sovereign. . . .

XIV

THE rest of the story is uncomfortably near to our present days to be analysed in great detail. After the conquest of Abyssinia before the military government of the country could be replaced by a civil administration, the Spanish civil war broke out. Mussolini backed Franco right from the beginning; Italian 'volunteers' fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Moors and Germans. It is, however, a great question what Spain is going to do now that the civil war is ended. The countries of the Axis hope that Franco will follow their lead and recognise their full authority. The Spaniards may have other ideas—but it would be idle speculation to foretell the fate of a country which has always hated foreigners and yet often called them in to settle internal disputes.

When Hitler marched into Austria, Mussolini must have had some qualms on the intentions of his Axis-partner. The Brenner is uncomfortably near to Italy and there is a German minority in the Trento. But the friendship—or the common interests—of the dictators weathered even this difficult period. When the Sudeten German dispute arose, it was Mussolini who pleaded for a last chance for peace. In Munich he played a hardly less important part than Hitler, Chamberlain or Daladier.

And when Germany 'presented the bill' for backing up Italy both in Abyssinia and Spain, anti-Jewish laws were passed by the Fascist State. They are hardly as severe as the Nuremberg edicts, but even so they show an acceptance of the Nazi principles, modified in the Latin manner which promise ill for Italian Jews. The 'Roman step' might prove a great deal more than a new way of walking. . . .

Quite recently it was France which became Mussolini's target. Tunisia and Corsica are demanded; Germany has shown the way the loud demands are often granted and

Mussolini saw no reason why he should not shout just as loud. Especially with finances at their lowest ebb on account of war expenditure and fall of exports. In the latter there is a seed of disagreement between Germany and Italy, for both of them are looking for economic domination in Central Europe and the Balkans; but whether this rivalry would ever break the Axis, it is difficult to tell.

A difficult problem for Mussolini is the question of Poland. Here German and Italian sympathies are sharply opposed and in case of a war might easily lead to a serious rupture.

On Good Friday, 1939, Italian troops landed on the Albanian coast and in the short space of two days they occupied the smallest Balkan state. King Zog and his Hungarian queen had to flee—the latter with her two days' old baby son—while Mussolini had the satisfaction of having his share of brutal aggression, emulating Hitler's hateful exploits. Albania was added to Italy's possessions and a potential danger created in the Mediterranean to French and British interests.

Meanwhile *il Duce* continues to play a decisive part in European politics ; whatever the objections to his policy, his person is in many ways likeable and estimable. Some call him " the most reliable traitor," others the greatest man of our century. The truth, as usual, lies in the middle. He is the right man who created the right place for himself ; who can be ruthless and charming, rude and polite, cunning and naïve—a human being whom Fate has placed at the rudder of a country with great traditions and many urgent problems. Fate may hold many things for him in store—but whether bad or good, his fame ought to be *ære perennium*. A man of iron will which often strikes sparks even if it does not always kindle a fire. . . .

